Buying system backwards may be forward step

Several weeks ago in this column, I repeated the standard advice given by independent computer consultants to small businesses: "Don't computerize until you can identify at least a few applications that will pay for the cost of the computer."

The advice seems sensible enough, especially when you consider the folly of "buying backwards," or buying a computer, having it installed, and then asking the salesman or consultant how it can be applied to your business.

The strategy that I subscribe to most often is: First, determine your requirements; second, find the software (the programs) that meet those requirements; and then look for the hardware (the computer) to run the software you've selected.

But in some cases it's OK to break the rules and buy backwards. Take the situation where a business does not have a computer, where the owners or managers don't have enough facts to cost-justify one, but where it's obvious that competitors are successfully using computers.

In this case, some action toward computerization is advised, even if it means "buying backwards."

The question then is: How can they get started without jumping in head over heels — so they can get comfortable using computers before they consider automating their entire manual operation?" Behind the question is the reasonable fear that if they move too quickly, and a new computer system does not work properly, it could jeopardize their business. In these cases, it seems reasonable to get your feet wet first — or at least dip in your toes.

If it's OK to break the rules and buy backwards, what equipment should you buy?

Some choices are safe

The safest choice: an IBM PC with two disk drives and 256 kilobytes of memory. In the last few years, this computer has become the standard "low-end" machine by which all others are judged. Thousands of business programs are available for it — more, in fact, than for any other small computer. This is key, because virtually any program you decide to purchase later on will run on it.

My advice on IBM PC copycats (such as less-expensive Radio Shack computers that claim to be compatible with the IBM PC): If you're not sure what you'll use the machine for later on, don't buy a copycat. Despite what is said about compatibility, there are still subtle differences that could adversely affect the software you select — or worse, cause it not to run. So, unless you are adventurous, don't take the chance.

In addition to the computer, you'll also need a printer. For almost all first-time situations, the best choice is an "impact" printer that uses a daisy-wheel printing element. The result is letter-quality that looks like it was typed on your typewriter. Don't even consider a "dot matrix" printer — regardless of the lower cost. Dot matrix for business letters is frowned upon.

Printer recommended

A common work-horse printer that I recommend is the Diablo 630, because it is fast and reliable. Other slower, less reliable and less expensive printers are available. Since speed, noise and print quality are a matter of taste, you might find another one just as good.

What about software? My advice here is to start with something simple.

One application that is perfect for beginners is *word processing*. Instead of typing whatever you type on a typewriter, do it on your new computer instead. With a low-end, easy-to-learn program, it will give you and your staff a good introduction to computers and some functionality at the same time. The choice of word processing as your first application dictates the choice of an impact printer.

A good starting selection for a word processing program is IBM Writing Assistant, which was developed by the same company that made the pfs:Write. pfs:Write is the top-selling, low-end word processing program, and IBM Writing Assistant is IBM's improved version of it. It has an excellent on-line spell-checking feature, which is a big hit with almost everyone who uses it. Even for people who consider themselves good spellers, the program catches normal typing errors that every typist makes.

Success is convincing

A big advantage of starting with a simple word-processing program is that you'll be able to convince yourself that computers can frequently be very useful even if you can't always cost-justify the expense. As you'll see, some emotional reasoning takes over. It is hard to put a "value" on an impressive-looking proposal prepared for your best client, or on the pride your staff may feel after learning to effectively use the system, or from the extra hours they might put in at home studying the manuals to become more productive at work.

Also, buying a computer and some software will permit you to begin judging some local computer dealers and software suppliers — so you'll be in a better position to shop for other programs and peripherals as you need them.

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